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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN'S PANJSHIR: THE PROVINCE THAT WORKS - PART II

REF: KABUL 526

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Panjshir province is a unique success story within Afghanistan. Having achieved unparalleled security, poppy-free status, and solid governance largely free from corruption, Panjshir has set the stage for further development, including roads and mining. The Panjshiris have accomplished all of this with no Coalition forces other than the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), no Afghan National Army (ANA), few NGOs, and limited resources from Kabul. This cable addresses governance and development in Panjshir, while Part I (reftel) addressed security and counter-narcotics.

GOVERNANCE

2. (SBU) Panjshir benefits from strong governance, which primarily reflects the leadership style of Governor Haji Bahlol Bahij. Governor Bahlol, a Mujahedeen commander under the legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud, exerts his personality and authority over every significant aspect of life in the province. He can regularly be seen at Provincial Development Council (PDC) meetings chiding ministry line directors for not doing enough in the valley. Bahlol's main priorities appear to the PRT to be well-placed, and include security, infrastructure development, and education. A vocal supporter of educating girls, he has specifically told village shuras they need a school for girls. On several occasions, Governor Bahlol has said to the PRT he believes governors in Afghanistan should have similar budgetary and line authority as U.S. governors.

3. (SBU) While members of Panjshir's Provincial Council (PC) do not challenge Bahlol's authority, they are seen by the populace as legitimate representatives of the people, and serve primarily as advocates for their districts in the in the PDC. Panjshir's second-tier of leadership -- the six district administrators, along with the mayor of Bazarak -- range from very capable and committed, as in the district of Khenj, to marginal in the district of Rokha. All act under the watchful eye of the governor.

4. (SBU) The Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) Executive Director is highly competent, and plays a key role in coordinating the work of the various ministry line directors. The line directors themselves represent varying degrees of competence, and as a rule, appear to be under-resourced by Kabul -- a frequent complaint from the governor and others. Panjshir lacks a resident line director from the Ministry of Mines, a surprise given the level of mineral resources present in the valley, ranging from iron to emeralds.

5. (SBU) Panjshir appears to be largely free of corruption, and the

PRT has seen no direct evidence of provincial officials enriching themselves through their positions. Indeed, Governor Bahlol has cited corruption as Afghanistan's greatest problem, saying it has led to an ineffective government that has lost the trust of the people, ultimately strengthening the Taliban. When a PC member appeared to possibly strong-arm a PRT contractor to enhance a contract for a canal contract running through his property, the governor summoned him to his office, threatening to arrest him if he received any personal benefit from the project. Bahlol has also advised the PRT to avoid awarding construction contracts to his brother-in-law, a competent contractor, due to the appearance of impropriety.

DEVELOPMENT

¶6. (SBU) Panjshir's security environment and activist governor enable development. During the second half of 2008 development flourished, with the construction of roads, schools, clinics, and micro-hydro electric plants. The majority of projects were funded by the PRT, Panjshir's main partner in development. For FY-09 to date, the PRT has over USD 41 million in on-going or committed Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) projects on the books, and anticipates the amount will nearly double by the end of FY-09. On-going USAID programs in the province include vocational training for 5,717 people, and 39 home-based schools focusing on girls. The number of NGOs in Panjshir remains disappointing given the "permissive" nature of the province. In addition to the Italian NGO "Emergency" which provides the bulk of healthcare in the valley, the Massoud Foundation is active in Panjshir, offering everything from English and computer classes, to micro-lending.

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¶7. (U) Among the most visible of Panjshir's development projects is Afghanistan's first power-generating wind farm, inaugurated November 2008. The PRT-funded wind farm generates 30 kW of electricity powering the new provincial government center, and is capable of being expanded to 100 kW. The power from the project allows the governor's staff and key ministry personnel to be co-located, improving governance. The wind farm has garnered substantial international attention, drawing visitors from other provinces looking to replicate the project.

¶8. (U) Provincial leadership and the PRT are in agreement that major infrastructure projects, such as roads and the mining sector, are important enablers of future development, particularly from the private sector. With this in mind, the PRT has received approval for improving and paving 70 km of the valley's primary road. This project, once complete, will allow vehicular traffic to drive from the Lion's Gate to the border of the Badakhshan province without leaving pavement. Ultimately, this connection could make the Panjshir Valley an important trade route linking China with the rest of Afghanistan.

DELL